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Fall 10-1-2006

Writing Sample

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Includes "The Writer," "The Plaice," and "The Giraffe."

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Mathilde Walter, "Writing Sample" (2006). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 162.

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Matilde Walter CLARK:

From the collection

Tingenes uorden ('Disorder of Things') (Copenhagen: 2005)

The Writer

He had within him an as yet unseen collection of sentences. When he went walking in the park, he could feel them tingling under his skin; it was merely a question of time before they would stream out of him in improbable, ground-breaking combinations. There was no doubt about it. All the signs were there that he was nurturing the Great Danish Novel. A large work in three volumes with myriads of amusing notes, references, digressions and anecdotes.

But when he came home after his walks he sat down in front of his electric typewriter and stared rigidly at the white sheet of paper waiting for the work which had seemed so full of promise in the park. Waiting for the sentences which went dumb, as it were, whenever he tried to pin them down.

Occasionally he succeeded in capturing the odd sentence, such as: 'Only the moon was witness in its lunes to the creation of his work'. He thought there was a cunning, tantalising *jeu de mots* inherent in the sentence with the archaic word 'lunes', deriving as it did from the word *luna* meaning, as everyone knew, 'moon'. To describe the moon as having lunes, fits, was a profound, subtle sentence, and it reflected his poetic leanings. He sat looking at 'Only the moon was witness in its lunes to the creation of his work', searching for the myriad of words which could follow up such a jewel, but there was nothing to add, so he had to abandon the solitary sentence on the piece of paper inserted in the typewriter.

During his walks, however, he could sense the outline of a voluminous work, supple and sufficient, rich in wisdom and wit. As a town hall clerk he had diverting daily contact with the words which so shamelessly denied him company later in the day. For example, one of his favourite activities was to write speeches for the mayor's public engagements. Not infrequently the mayor was invited to inaugurate a new roundabout or a bus stop, and on these occasions the mayor's speeches were created by the Writer's hand.

He had secretly anticipated and appropriated the title of 'the Writer', which he deemed rightfully his. It was not unreasonable, considering the promise of the sentences inside him.

He had also turned his hand to a party song in his time at the town hall: on the occasion of the mayor's 60th birthday. It was, of course, a minor venture compared to the work which lay smouldering within him, but it was by no means a second-rate song, and he couldn't help noticing that several town hall employees had folded it and put it in their breast pockets, probably to return to some of the highlights at a later date.

The Writer also wrote several magnificent Christmas cards to close and distant relatives. Every year he purchased approximately fifty cards picturing Christmas pixies at the Post Office with the intention of writing to pretty well anyone. Old school friends who were no more than a faded sepia blob on a school photograph and with whom he had lost contact ages ago

were a good excuse to let out some of the words clamouring in his head. What an occasion it would be to receive such a wonderful card from a long forgotten fellow pupil! What a life-enriching experience! He thought lovingly of the scene which would be played out when the little Christmas epic landed on the hallway floor. What wouldn't his old school friends think of the Writer! They would realise that he had really come a long way in life. It would be obvious to them. The thought overwhelmed him, and he felt inspired to commit a small ode to paper about the joyful Christmas period and the ebbing year. He liked that word: ebbing. It not only described the essence of the time of year, but also revealed his refined linguistic sense.

The Writer safely assumed that he could gradually begin to embrace his title and the satisfactions of his prospective greatness. It wouldn't be overstating his case at this particular moment, things were looking so rosy. Of course, one shouldn't make too much of it. Obviously, if someone in his situation cut too much of a dash, there would be a chance that he would arouse envy. That was by no means his intention. It wasn't that he thought the talent which had been bestowed upon him made him anything special. It was simply the way it was. It was a question of time before this talent materialised into what would undoubtedly be called The Great Danish Novel.

His colleagues quickly picked up on it. He was now referred to as the Writer. Signposting for blind exits? Give it to the Writer, they would say. Some greeted him when he was taking his afternoon constitutional in the park. 'There's the Writer, they would exclaim, and accompanied their greeting with a doffed hat. Everywhere, wherever he went, they were familiar with who he was and the erudition he embodied. All the words he had salted away. How remarkable humanity was! For all those years no-one had had an inkling of the treasures which lay hidden behind the neatly pressed waistcoat he always wore. Far and wide, they acknowledged his true identity, even at the hostelry he had begun to frequent when his park promenade didn't immediately yield the returns for which he had hoped. He could have a tipple on his way home to nurture and assuage the passage of sentences out of his system.

Truth to tell, it wasn't perhaps so much that they didn't want to come out as that they came out in a somewhat chaotic sequence. One sentence here, one sentence there. It was simply impossible to say where they fitted into the novel. If only he knew what the whole thing was about. One moment a sentence might appear which seemed destined for the very beginning - whatever that was - and the next there might be a sentence which could conceivably find its appropriate context on page 323. Who could possibly know?

The Writer didn't. He could write all the sentences down, of course he could, but what a job it would be the day he had to sort through to put them in the right order. It simply wasn't feasible.

Naturally, he did try writing them down. A phrase had come to mind on one of his walks: 'the recumbent air beneath the tips of the lime trees'. When he got home he wrote it down and hung it on the wall with the confusion of phrases and sentences resulting from his afternoon exercise. It was a colossal task. However, the phrase looked really good on his wall until it occurred to him that another writer, J.P.Jacobsen, had probably had left his prints on it. It was taken down and he was left feeling dejected. How far could he rely on the other phrases and sentences? In fact, it was actually hard to determine whether they belonged to his forthcoming work or novels already

in existence. The sentences had their own lunes, much like the moon which witnessed the creation of his work.

The novel-to-be on the wall grew. As the years went by, the sentences spread like year rings in a tree. You could almost count every single afternoon walk he had taken since he had started writing down his thoughts. And, as unpromising as it seemed, you had a sense of the whole. The sentences stood on tiptoes around the first like a throng of people around a traffic accident: 'Only the moon was witness in its lunes to the creation of his work.' It was as if they were competing to be *the* sentence to follow up the first, but it was impossible to say which one was the true successor. The possibilities were nigh on endless. And if he opted for one the whole thing would already have a kind of direction. Possibly not a particularly clear direction, but one which, as the sentences swarmed around the original, would narrow his universe and the options available. Imagine he chose the wrong one and moved towards what might turn out to be a dead end. Where would he put all the remaining sentences?

Furthermore, if he did tackle the impossible task of identifying the second sentence, he would be left facing the same problem with its successor. The whole thing was an endless source of confusion and unendurable decision-making. How many directions could he follow? How many stories on this wall would not be enacted every hour, every day, every night? Which one of these stories was it the Writer's duty to tell? Which system would reveal the unforgettable novel he was brooding over?

But the sentences materialised in higgledy-piggledy form. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason, no internal logic in their mode of arrival. When they did eventually appear it was as if they came rushing out and frolicked with him until he went completely insane and had to repair to the hostelry for a pick-me-up.

All this was in his mind as they greeted him. Oh, isn't that the Writer? Well, if it isn't the Writer. And they raised their hats. If only they knew what a mess he was in. What an onus, what a burden he carried. What responsibility rested on one's shoulders when one was endowed with an innate talent of such proportions! Administering it was a job in itself, but how would they know, being equipped with more modest talents and thus humbler goals in life. A talent like his was not a gift, not at all: it was a trial.

As the years passed the number of sentences grew. Now they no longer spread like rings around the original sentence, but hung in thick layers on top of each other like fish scales. The Writer didn't realise, but the wall had become pitted from being perforated year in, year out by the thousands of pins, nails and other convenient objects with which the multifarious small notes bearing hopeful sentences had been fastened. Furthermore, there was the weight of the novel adorning the wall. Late one night it became simply too much. The Writer had just narrowed down the range for the second sentence to two very promising options when the wall capitulated with a crash and scraps of his grand oeuvre fluttered up around his ears and buried him in the mayhem. In his hand he held the sentence which might well become the inscription on his gravestone: 'Only the moon was witness in its lunes to the creation of his work.'

This became all the truer as by an improbable coincidence all the scribbled sentences fell in the correct order at the moment of impact and in a very few minutes (before he was found by a neighbour who was awoken by

the crash and before the notes were jumbled up in the confusion) the Writer was indeed buried under 'The Great Danish Novel.

*

The Plaice

I heard about Otto Hoffmeyer in the winter of '98.

My long-term partner at the chess club, Thomas Elsass, had met him personally on several occasions. They had once been on the same philosophy course at the university a couple of years before: 'The Paradoxical Self in Kierkegaard's Writings'. In addition, that same year, in early spring, he had gone to a faculty gathering at the house of one of the younger lecturers, where Otto Hoffmeyer had also been present. My chess partner could verify that Otto had behaved quite normally at this time, which one generally does at gatherings of this nature, and there had therefore been no cause for surprise or concern. The following semester he didn't turn up for his studies, but that is nothing out of the ordinary either, and the university friends he spoke most to assumed he had taken a leave of absence inasmuch as they speculated about his absence at all.

Thus there was nothing in his behaviour to suggest that anything untoward had happened to him. But the event which subsequently took place was so extraordinary that we had to delve into the reasons for its occurrence. Thomas Elsass paid a call on Otto Hoffmeyer's girlfriend, who – although she didn't know it herself – gave him a useful lead which put us on his trail. She had been abroad at the time of the accident, but she was able to tell us that Otto Hoffmeyer had become very taciturn towards the end.

This snippet of information was what was allowed us to reconstruct the events, as in a game of chess, to unravel all the moves, to chart what went wrong. For, in life, as in a game of chess, there is always an Archimedean point, a fulcrum which determines future actions. These are the fruits of our efforts.

The fatal event, the catalyst, must have taken place earlier the same year, possibly at the beginning of the summer. The extraordinary thing is that it happened without him or anyone else noticing. He was in his late twenties, and he was on vacation from the university when a word unobtrusively slipped out of his vocabulary. The word was 'plaice', which for its part was innocuous enough. It is possible to pass through life unscathed without this word.

Naturally, he didn't detect the loss. Had he done so, the awareness of the existence of the missing words would have simply been predetermined, which would have meant nothing was missing. But at that moment he was sitting in a restaurant and had to forgo the fillet of plaice, which he would have fancied, if he had known.

The plaice disappeared, or to be more precise, it remained where it was, in other words, with the chef in the kitchen where it splashed around in a tub of water to stay fresh for as long as possible. Of course he had experienced searching for a word before. He had often lain awake at night trying to

remember the name of such and such an actor who was in such and such a film, the title of which he had also suddenly forgotten. It was a kind of contagious forgetfulness whereby one memory marker after the other fell like dominoes. He could imagine the actor in a different film, in which there was another famous actor, whose name he would immediately forget, in the same way as he also forgot the film title.

He had discovered a system to deal with the times when this strange, fatiguing phenomenon occurred. First of all, he searched through the alphabet until he found the letter with which he intuitively felt the desired name or word started. Another solution he had had some success with was, as it were, to place the word on a mental glass plate so that he could read the word on the other side. Of course it was a trick; he was fooling his subconscious into revealing what he was after. But the difference between these situations and that of the restaurant was that, as far as the former were concerned, he knew something was missing. To such an extent that he was almost hyperventilating with irritation as he turned over all the Scrabble letters. Once he lay awake for three consecutive nights until, with an orgiastic mental manoeuvre, he rooted out the particular word from the depths of his subconscious: 'approval'. Another time he had read almost all the words in the dictionary under 'c' before it came to him that the word he was looking for was 'precarious'.

But none of this could be compared with what happened that evening at the restaurant. If the concept had been in his head, he would have had fillet of fish and that is the crucial difference. The concept was lost. That was the point, the fatal move which Thomas Elsass and I suspected destiny had played in its game with Otto Hoffmeyer.

In this context, the most remarkable occurrence was his reaction when, as fate would have it, a couple of weeks later he was served a magnificent freshly caught specimen cooked in butter without even ordering it. It was one of those mishaps which the numbers 6 and 9 will have on their conscience. An elderly gentlemen on table 9 had ordered fish; Otto Hoffmeyer on table 6 had decided to try his luck with le plat du jour. The chef finished preparing both meals at the same time and threw the waiter's order numbers down beside each plate. However, because the waiter in his haste read the numbers upside down, each found its way to the other table. The gentleman on table 9 was pleasantly surprised to get a portion of roast pork with parsley sauce and failed to mention anything about the fish to the waiter.

At table 6, on the other hand, Otto Hoffmeyer sat staring at his plate where the crispy golden fillet of plaice lay alongside three small new potatoes, a pinch of dill and a blob of homemade tartar sauce. He was rather taken aback, but devoured the dill, the lemon and the three small potatoes without taking his eyes off the large, flat, brown object for one second. With a forbearing smile, he made it clear to the waiter that they needn't have bothered with the thing, but the rest tasted good.

Later his concepts of halibut, herring, rockfish, angler fish and the weever fish vanished too, yes, the whole fish family disappeared along with Italian and French cuisine. Presumably he also lost the ability to *recognise* these dishes and thus to comprehend them in the context they should be comprehended. In short, they no longer existed for him. He simply couldn't *see* them in the deepest sense of the word. He found himself turning to a variety of hot dog stalls, snack bars and the butcher's small trays of odd slushy salads. This limited his diet to quite an extent, but he found a certain peace of

mind in the practical ready made meals from the supermarket freezers, as their contents were indefinable in a much more expected and thus acceptable way. Faced with this phenomenon, it is by no means unique to lose words.

Some of the words which dropped out of the range of his consciousness for ever were of course more important than others. He could manage perfectly well without adjectives, at least at first. All they did for him was to give the world colour and a smell, make it concrete and recognisable. Whether any given object is green or red, pale or inflamed, neither adds to nor detracts from its essence. It is not important whether the chair is unattractive or rickety so long as you can sit in it without it collapsing. And because he wasn't aware himself that his world had shrivelled into a grey indeterminate mass, he didn't miss it. To know this, he would have required a frame of reference, the ability to compare with richer colours, which, according to our analysis, he had lost.

It wasn't something which impeded his dealings with other people. Everyone knew examples of a reticent type of person who eschewed the use of adjectives, and even though, in the opinion of my friend and chess partner, Thomas Elsass, he had been fairly colourful in his choice of language before, no-one was disconcerted by his new predispositions. Even his girlfriend did not miss it. Whenever she asked, her bottom never looked big.

The next thing to happen was that a large part of his everyday life ceased to exist for him in its previous form. He no longer knew how he spent most of his time as the next word to leak from his dwindling vocabulary was 'philosophy'. So far he had invested five years of his life preparing for his final dissertation, which he had supposed would constitute the culmination of all his thinking hitherto, clad in an unparalleled – except in literature – lustrous linguistic costume. Now, however, the human race would have to forgo the solution to problems of consciousness because the loss of the concept of philosophy triggered an erosion of his scheme of the world, and so Kant, Socrates, qualia, consciousness, the 20th century and the sentence "What is it like to be a bat?" were gone too.

Fortunately he was familiar with the practice of taking summer holidays and he didn't feel that he was missing out on anything. In reality the only consequence the loss of the concept of philosophy brought was that he didn't turn up for his university course as planned on 1st September. No-one felt any sense of loss: neither his girlfriend who worked in a record shop during the day, nor his student friends, nor for that matter humanity in general, which was unaware that the problems of consciousness would otherwise have been resolved.

Thus life continued on its way, much as normal. As regards the word 'way', he lost the word from his vocabulary, but that didn't remotely stop him from making his own way. He had no problems walking. And, strangely enough, the verb 'walk' didn't disappear until six months later when he looked outside his door for his shoes, the concept of which promptly receded, and so he had to leave his hallway totally barefoot.

As the words went missing, he saw his world being reduced. When 'corkscrew' went, he experienced a brief period of frustration until the concept of 'wine' also came to grief and calm was restored. Accordingly, Thomas Elsass and I agreed that there was a certain order to things. The term 'arm bends' vanished, which was convenient as – if the truth has to be told (although the concept of truth had gone the same way as philosophy) – he

was no sportsman; and when his concept of insults and abuse went, no-one felt the loss, least of all him.

As we moved towards December and the days became shorter and colder, he still maintained his morning routine of sitting barefoot on a bench by the lakes and reading his newspaper while feeding the ducks with his breakfast leftovers. Thomas Elsass had been told about the bare feet by Otto Hoffmeyer's girlfriend, who had been told by the person living in the flat below Otto's.

We guessed that the concept of 'winter' had gone, just like the adjectives 'cold' and 'blue', and the contents of his morning meal had changed from rolls to the butcher's salads so that the ducks kept their distance. The morning walks to the lakes were nowhere near the pleasure they had once been, and as December approached his health was deteriorating.

Fortuitously, his world still included the word 'doctor', and as he was only too aware, laryngitis and sticky mucus were not particularly pleasant, so he arranged an appointment.

At this point one wonders how, on a purely physical level, he got through his daily activities and how it must have felt generally to have such a woeful conceptual framework in a richly varied world. One has to imagine that the practical matters of the day were carried out in a thick fog of strange objects and people, whose words and actions must have seemed unreal to him. After protracted reflection my chess partner and I came to the conclusion that we were mistaken. He simply didn't discover the existence of those things which he with his limitations wasn't able to comprehend anyway. In his own eyes his world was complete.

Otto Hoffmeyer met his doctor. The doctor was the classic sort with white coat, stethoscope and a pair of very thick glasses, which effectively cut him off from the reality his patients represented. In other words, there was no chance that the doctor would detect his actual problem. Only its symptoms, the deep cough and the singular appearance - a consequence of the most important source of nourishment coming from butcher's salads - were of interest to the doctor. The doctor scribbled down a few things on a yellow scrap of paper, which he put into the hand of our conceptually impoverished friend. Then he mumbled a whole gamut of things in a kind of Danish only spoken in a small number of exclusive circles and one which you didn't need to be stricken by a defecting vocabulary in order not to understand. The doctor held a mini-lecture about the outstanding qualities of a certain pink pill. The pill might put him in a better frame of mind, the doctor said. It would be like going on a never-ending holiday.

Not one of the things the doctor said made any impression on him, except the word 'holiday', which remained hanging in the air, and he took it home with the yellow note, which, in his world, was no more than just a note.

The holiday was soon arranged. Nowadays most things can be organised over the phone, so long as you have the patience to wait a long time - and you are not bothered by talking to a machine. He not only managed to book a ticket, but also to turn up at the airport punctually.

In the plane on his way to the Spanish island (whose name was gone the moment he boarded, along with 'plane', 'holiday', 'cabin pressure' and the sentence 'What are you doing, you idiot?') he was amused by the tray of all the funny, small, plastic dishes of warm food, the cakes with glacé cherries and the bowl-shaped, plastic cups with coffee slopping around. He wondered how far

it was to Hans Knudsens Plads. His thoughts were now such that the few remaining concepts slipped into random gaps in sentences, creating unpredictable meanings.

Thomas Elsass and I imagine the tragic accident to have occurred in the following way.

After pouring the coffee in the magazine holder in front of him, placing the glass cherry in his neighbour's notebook and arranging a Wiener Schnitzel in his breast pocket, he picked up the small salad, noted the white treetops outside, pressed the button, got up and walked towards the exit. Here he got a good grip on the handle and tugged while enjoying the whistling of ducks and the bloody elk which seemed to turn the explosion of the wind for ever.

Otto Hoffmeyer plunged downwards for want of concepts.

But Thomas Elsass and I, sitting hunched over the chequered board which proffers such endless scope with so few rules, often imagine what would have happened to Otto if there had been no accident, if he had continued to live his life without any concepts. One variant is that there was a rich old lady with heavy gold jewellery and hair piled high on her head travelling with him on board the plane on her way to her flat on Mallorca and she was able to use a young man like him who had little to say, but was both clean and biddable. However, we always agree that the way it ended was best for him. In the minutes he was flying through the air we have a mental picture of the remaining concepts quietly fading away, now as quiet as the state of his consciousness. He was in that wonderful place, free and happy, without any idea that it would soon be over.

*

The Giraffe

Just one look and he knew they belonged together. His life would never be the same again, and he would do everything in his power to release it, however crazy that sounded, even to his own ears. It was probably what was termed a necessity, he mused.

He didn't know how he had got into this position. It was, to put it mildly, abnormal for a man of his years – a man with wife, family and permanent job, a local defence man and chairman of the house owners' association – to skip work and go to the zoo. It wasn't easy to take yourself seriously either, and he almost sniggered at the thought of his curious trip. Here he was, standing in the middle of the zoo, with his tie on, chuckling. The woman in front of him with the housewife's hairdo, rucksack and rural accent turned round and gave him a look which suggested that he was perverted, or worse.

However, he had suddenly realised why he'd had the urge to get off the bus and walk straight through the main entrance into the zoo and to the caged giraffe. He stood there with his briefcase and eau de cologne, and began

to laugh out loud, almost relieved, because it was only now, this very moment, that his life had meaning. The world took on colour, sound, smell and everything clicked into place as he repeated the words 'my giraffe' inside his head.

It stretched its long neck over the fence and blinked its excessively long eyelashes as it chewed with its lower jaw. Its soft mouth; its aroma of giraffe. He stood by the cage for a long time. It wasn't something he could tell anyone else. His wife, Inge, wouldn't understand. Nor his boss, Mr Møller. He would have to tell his wife that he had been at work and his boss that he had been ill. A bout of flu, or perhaps a short-lived virus, although he knew this was anything but short-lived. It was here to stay.

The following time he had taken nuts along with him. He had been to the library and studied giraffes' eating habits, and while he hadn't found anything about nuts, he knew instinctively that nuts were right. Didn't it munch twigs and buds from the acacia trees on the savannah? Obviously they didn't feed it nuts at the zoo; they drew the line at corn and rolled oats – although it had to be said in their defence that they also imported hay especially from Africa. But you couldn't trust anyone who could find it in their hearts to lock up such a beautiful, innocent animal. They obviously didn't understand its needs. If they had done, they wouldn't have locked it up; hence you knew they were not to be trusted. Ergo, nuts. Nuts and eau de cologne.

He had left his tie at home. You can have too much of a good thing. He had got up at the usual time, put on his suit, a freshly-pressed clean shirt, no tie though. Then he had taken his briefcase and kissed his wife goodbye, exactly as usual. He had to take precautions and make sure he didn't become the focus of unnecessary attention or concern. It wasn't that the giraffe represented a direct threat to his relationship with his wife; it was simply that his and the giraffe's fates were strangely interwoven. It changed nothing and yet it changed everything. Inge must not become concerned, so he left for work as he always did. With books about giraffes' eating habits in his briefcase.

Every day he turned up with a bag of nuts – always new kinds, but never almonds. It was important to remember that the concentration of Prussic acid in this particular nut would simply kill the animal. He spent a lot of hours in the zoo while he was making plans. There were so many loose ends he had to keep track of before he made a move. You should not simply rush headlong into anything. It had to be prepared, down to the last detail.

It wasn't just a matter of releasing the giraffe. As difficult as that was, it wasn't the issue. Had he heard of anyone else embarking upon such an insane venture? No, *he* hadn't at any rate. You had to laugh at the idea; he did. If only that was all there was to it, but you had to look forward in time. Had he any idea where they would live, for example? He couldn't just roll up with a giraffe. That much he did know. Inge would consider that beyond the pale, bordering on the eccentric. She was nice

, but there were a number of things she couldn't appreciate. The necessity of it would be beyond her. Apart from that, their garden was too small. No, that wouldn't do. The summer house was an option, but after careful analysis of the pros and cons it was rejected on the bench in front of the cage with the autumnal red and yellow leaves falling in his lap. What would he tell Inge? Inge was the problem. Inge, every blessed time. He heaved a sigh of resignation and gave the giraffe a fat little macadamia nut.

The zookeeper was beginning to get suspicious about him: he quickly realised that. At closing time he would pass the cage and fix him with that firm look he used on other people's naughty children and say the zoo was closing now. After a while the keeper would even escort him to the gates, where he would stand and watch him leave.

On Saturdays when he was supposed to meet the others in the local defence unit, he put on his uniform, placed the leafy green forage cap on his head and went to the zoo. He took a lot more care with his morning ablutions on Saturdays. Last time he left wearing his uniform and eau de cologne he noticed Inge giving him a funny look. As if she were thinking her own thoughts. He would have to avoid that at all costs. Take some precautionary measures.

At night, though, everything was easy. He sat on the bench at the front of the cage and suddenly the bars opened. They turned into autumnal leaves fluttering into his lap. They became branches he could climb up, all the way up to the giraffe. They were sounds which climbed and rose over the savannah towards the pale full moon hovering above them. At night he and the giraffe were united.

His boss had called to speak to Inge; Inge had spoken to his boss. He could feel that. Was asking about his flu and prying into his private life. He noticed her glances when he left in the morning with his briefcase full of books about giraffes' eating habits, literature about the gem of the savannah, the bag of nuts and the aroma of eau de cologne. Which had in some ungovernable way been replaced by the stench of yak and camel when he returned in the evening. They had their suspicions, did Inge and his boss. And then there were Inge's whisperings to the children. If only they would spare him the looks and leave him in peace.

At night, though, the sounds of the savannah grew, indefinable sounds, exotic sounds, sounds he had never heard in Vangede or any other place. The bars fell and became a bridge, no, wait, a wood raft, which they drifted off on, away, out onto the open sea, and he awoke from his euphoria when Inge switched on the light and gave him *The Look*.

Inge had rifled through his briefcase and found all the giraffe books. She asked him what he was actually doing with all the books. She wept. He had to lie and tell her he was studying something to do with a case at work. Inge couldn't understand why it was necessary to research giraffes' eating habits in a loans and interest rates department in a building society; she couldn't understand how the two things were connected; she had always thought that his daily routine consisted of figures and the occasional telephone conversation, an annual Christmas dinner and a salary increase of 1.7%. She didn't have a clue what was going on inside him. What was happening?

This was a special mission he couldn't tell her anything about, unfortunately. He would really have liked to, but it wasn't in his gift. It was classified. It was better that she didn't know any more, for her own sake.

From now on, he would have to tread warily. The giraffe books were a blunder. He hadn't taken any precautions. The bringing together of him and the giraffe was a task of such immensely difficult proportions that it required his full attention.

He sat on the bench in front of the giraffe's cage and made his meticulous calculations on squared paper. All the elements which had to be

factored in if you were going to do it properly. Nothing could be left to chance. You couldn't rely on anyone; even the caging of the giraffe gave rise to suspicion. They lived in a world, he concluded, where mistrust was the only way to survive. That was the only thing that could connect him with the giraffe and the pale moon over the savannah.

The calculations multiplied in line with the constant emergence of new elements, and one pad after the other was filled to the margins with precise calculations of the angle of descent of autumn leaves, the carrying capacity of the raft and the loudness of laughter. If he laughed really loud, could the raft handle it? He tried it. He laughed louder. No. More was needed. He would have to make further calculations.

The children stayed with their grandparents. Inge talked and wept, wept and talked. He couldn't remember what she said. He missed the savannah. Well, strictly speaking, he had never been there, he was aware of that of course, but he missed it anyway, its sounds, its herds of gnus. Inge's mouth turned into a large, pale moon floating over the savannah. And the words flowed out of it, chords of words, just gushing out of her mouth, like narrow outlets of a river which collected into bigger rivers and finally joined the great open oceans. The words bore him along. He laughed. Why hadn't he thought of that? All the complicated calculations and he hadn't seen it. So straightforward. So simple. He flowed with them, he didn't put up any resistance, allowed himself to be borne along, and as Inge talked, it went faster and faster, it was easier and easier, the force of the words was perfect, it carried him to the cage, to the giraffe cage. Everything was so simple, so very simple that he had to laugh, and he saw the bars folding down and forming rafts which were to carry them. He saw themselves being carried, the giraffe and he, drifting away, gone, away out onto the great open sea. The moon hung as it should, in the star-studded sky above the dark water, and he could already smell the savannah.

Translated from the Danish by Don Bartlett
